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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Predictable Coverage of  
Signing of the Joint Mechanism for Tsunami Relief and  
Reconstruction

1. (U) Summary: Sri Lankan media provided widespread prominent editorial coverage of the June 24 signing of the Joint Mechanism (Post-Tsunami Management Structure, P-TOMS) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in high circulation Sunday edition newspapers on June 26, 2005. Front-page coverage in independent newspapers was somewhat less prominent than might have been expected, but editorialists devoted significant commentary exclusively to the event. Headline writers and editorialists took predictable stances in their commentary on the signing; Government owned media praised the agreement, while opposition-friendly independent newspapers questioned details and implementation of the accord, and Marxist/Sinhala nationalist newspapers took a decidedly pessimistic tone. End summary.

2. (U) Government owned English and vernacular print press ran front-page banner headlines celebrating the June 24 conclusion of the Joint Mechanism agreement after President Kumaratunga's long struggle to win support, while independent papers focused front page stories on political disputes arising from the Joint Mechanism and commented on the accord extensively in editorial sections. Government owned Sunday Observer (circulation 100,000) led with, "World commends President," and "Mass support for P-TOMS." Editorials also predictably commended the signing of the Joint Mechanism. The mainstream independent Sunday Times (circulation 150,000) was less celebratory; editorialists bannered, "P-TOMS: Treachery on Treasury," "The pitfalls of P-TOMS," and "A political tsunami," in which the editor contended through the Joint Mechanism the government "has yielded to the very propaganda of the LTTE that the GOSL [Government of Sri Lanka] represents the Sinhalese, and therefore the GOSL is a Sinhalese Government!" Pro-JVP (former junior alliance partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) Sunday Island's (circulation 85,000) editorialists bannered, "Home and dry?" and "Joint Mechanism - all fiction and misplaced facts?" One editorial expressed outrage the President had gone against the JVP, "who not so long ago was the President's lifesaver, bestowing government power on her party and cohorts."

3. (U) The Sunday Leader's World Affairs editorialist, Gamini Weerakoon, in an op-ed titled "American ambiguity towards the LTTE," wrote, "the fact that this [joint] mechanism... appears to be... for granting international recognition to the LTTE is being completely ignored by these nations committed to fight[ing] terrorism."

4. (U) The Tamil and Sinhala language press also afforded the signing of the Joint Mechanism broad coverage, often mirroring the stories of their English-language counterparts. Government owned papers reported the agreement with the most prominence, and virtually all Tamil papers lauded the accord. Government owned Tamil Sunday Thinakaran led with, "UNP [United National Party] lends hand for majoritarian chauvinist propaganda," criticizing Ranil Wickremesinghe's party's alleged statements of concern that the Sinhalese would be underrepresented by the Joint Mechanism. Thinakaran's editorialist expressed similar sentiments in an editorial titled, "UNP repeats history."

5. (U) Television and radio broadcasts reported the signing of the Joint Mechanism in a relatively straightforward manner, with state-run stations expressing praise for the President's perseverance in signing the accord.

6. (SBU) Comment: Government owned media, which generally act as the President's mouthpiece, celebrated the signing of the Joint Mechanism or P-TOMS in front page headlines as well as editorials. Predictably, the mainstream independent press expressed reservations and exploited the political fallout of the President's decision while the Sinhala nationalist press emphasized allegations of treachery and suspicion against the LTTE and the international community who allegedly "coerced" the President to sign the accord.

End Comment.

Lunstead